



2003 Southern California Fires AFTER ACTION REPORT



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**STATEWIDE AAR
2003 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA FIRES**

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GOVERNOR'S OFFICE OF EMERGENCY SERVICES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

This document provides information on the 2003 Southern California fires. In California, as part of the Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS), statute requires the Governor's Office of Emergency Services (OES) to produce an After Action Report (AAR) within 120 days after each declared disaster. "This report shall review public safety response and disaster recovery activities." The supporting SEMS regulations require jurisdictions "declaring a local emergency for which the governor proclaims a state of emergency, and any state agency responding to that emergency shall complete and transmit an after action report to OES within ninety (90) days of the close of the incident period." Although the 2003 Southern California wildfires incident period officially closed on March 31, 2004, state agencies, local government and other stakeholders were requested to provide their AARs to OES by February 20, 2004. The purpose of this accelerated reporting requirement was two-fold: 1) to capture response efforts, lessons learned, and any recommendations before critical data was lost due to the passage of time, and 2) to ensure that information from the AAR process was accessible to the Blue Ribbon Fire Commission.

BACKGROUND

Beginning on October 21, 2003, southern California experienced the worst wildfire sieges in California's history. When the worst of the fires ended on November 5, 2003, there were 24 deaths (including one firefighter), 246 injuries, 3,631 structures destroyed and 739,597 acres blackened by 14 different fires in five counties. The response cost/damage estimate is over 3 billion dollars and required 15,631 personnel, including firefighters, law enforcement, administrative support, and management staff, to assist with fire suppression efforts.

The catastrophic nature of these fires prompted Los Angeles, Riverside, San Diego, San Bernardino, Riverside and Ventura counties to proclaim local emergencies. Governor Davis proclaimed a State of Emergency on October 26, 2003 for the counties of Los Angeles, San Bernardino, San Diego and Ventura and requested a Presidential Declaration. President Bush issued a Presidential Declaration of Major Disaster for four of the five affected counties on October 27, 2003. Riverside County was added to the list of federally declared disasters on October 30, 2003.

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Additional losses were caused by a normal December storm in the burned areas that resulted in floods and mudflows. Sixteen people were killed in a San Bernardino County canyon, neighborhoods in San Bernardino and San Diego counties were inundated with mud, and the flood control debris basins in San Bernardino County were filled to near capacity by the two-day event.

The California Fire and Rescue Mutual Aid System brought together more resources than had ever been used in its 54-year history. This system effectively coordinated the response of approximately 5,480 personnel that staffed 1,160 local government fire engines and 102 OES fire engines. California's neighboring states, Nevada, Arizona, and Oregon, also provided vital support to the siege by sending in 120 additional fire engines and the accompanying staff. Combined local, state, and federal resources totaled 15,631 personnel from the fire services and 1,898 fire engines. It exceeded the previous wildfire record set by the Wildland Fires of 1993.

SCOPE OF THE REPORT

OES prepared this comprehensive AAR on the 2003 Southern California Fire Siege. State agencies and operational areas (OAs) submitted their AARs using the Response Information Management System (RIMS) AAR form (original or modified versions). In addition, OES conducted fact-finding meetings with the impacted OAs during January 2004. OAs were given the option of using the fact-finding meeting (and supporting documentation) as their official AAR instead of completing the RIMS form.

Recommendations

The AAR process allowed OES to identify numerous recommendations for improving future responses to major incidents. Specific, itemized recommendations, which will subsequently become the basis for corrective actions, are contained in detail in the comprehensive statewide AAR. Below are the final findings and recommendations that fall into eight broad categories:

1. **Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS)**: Most local governments and state agencies indicated that SEMS functioned well and helped them mount an effective response. Several agencies made specific recommendations to improve SEMS including: (1) capitalize upon existing SEMS strengths; (2) implement proposed modifications or refinements to SEMS based protocols and procedures; (3) modify RIMS to make it more user friendly; (4) conduct SEMS training on a continuous basis to ensure all potential responders have the appropriate training; and, (5) encourage SEMS training for federal agencies to foster federal-state integration at the Disaster Field Office (DFO).
2. **Mutual Aid (MA)**: Most local government representatives mentioned several areas for improving MA response and capabilities. These areas include (1) providing more mutual aid training to assist with coordination issues; (2) establishing a statewide standard badging identification system to allow appropriate personnel access to restricted areas;

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- (3) encouraging state agencies to develop protocols regarding use of their local agency office personnel and equipment, and (4) addressing the issue of possible reimbursement.
3. Communications: Local government and state agencies need to have more interoperable communications in order to have a rapid and effective response. A number of local governments recommended that OES establish additional caches of communications equipment for easy access during disaster response. Local government and state agencies need to evaluate their communication systems to ensure there is interoperability and redundancy.
 4. Interstate Coordination: Some states were unfamiliar with the provisions of the signed Interstate Civil Defense and Disaster Compact as it relates to response and reimbursement. A fact sheet needs to be developed that describes how to activate and use the Compact. Several agencies indicated there is a need to streamline the method for obtaining out-of-state resources to reduce the resource acquisition time frame.
 5. Accessing Federal Military Assets: Local government and state fire agencies indicated there is a need to streamline the method of obtaining federal military assets to reduce the resource acquisition time frame.
 6. Federal-State Coordination: Local government and state agencies indicated a need for a smoother transition from response to recovery. The consensus among respondents was that plans and procedures should be developed for the DFO to effectively integrate federal and state agency staff at the DFO and to minimize unnecessary organizational issues. (In addition, the flood threat and subsequent floods and mudflow demonstrated the need for agencies to be flexible and able to alternate between response, recovery, and back to the response mode.)
 7. State Agency Plans and Procedures: Several state agencies that had not been involved in previous disaster response activities identified a need to rework their plans and procedures to incorporate SEMS and mutual aid. Existing emergency plans in some agencies need to be revised to include the following issues: debris management, animal care during disasters, volunteer management, donations management, and medical/health/mental health integration.
 8. Financial Issues: Reimbursement issues need to be resolved for mutual aid deployments, volunteer organizations and other entities. All agencies identified a need for funding for training - regardless of the type of training. In addition, funding is needed for long-term environmental impacts due to the burned out and denuded landscapes